



Killer Whale Fact Sheet

All killer whales are members of the toothed-whale family and belong to the same genus and species, *Orcinus orca*. However, there are two forms of killer whale found in Puget Sound, called “residents” and “transients.” Some taxonomists (scientists who study the relationships within and between species) believe that some differences between forms of killer whales may be great enough to further sub-divide the species.

As the terms transient and resident imply, the two forms of killer whales have different behavior and movement patterns, but both forms can be found seasonally in Puget Sound. Transient killer whales travel in smaller groups (called “pods”) and hunt other marine mammals for food. Resident killer whales spend more time in the Sound, travel in larger pods and eat mostly fish.

Southern Resident killer whales are fish eating with a seasonal (summer) home range that includes Washington and southern British Columbia waters (Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the southern Strait of Georgia). Along the north Pacific coast, resident killer whales occur from Oregon and Washington to the Bering Sea. In the Pacific Northwest, the two closest resident killer whale communities (groups of pods that share a common home range), are the Southern Residents and the Northern Residents, which live in northern British Columbia and southeast Alaska.

Killer whales grow to considerable size. The males can reach lengths of 25 feet or more and weigh 10,000 pounds. Females are typically a little smaller. They range all over the world, including the Atlantic Ocean and as far north as Iceland, as far south as Antarctica.

Most of the information we have about Southern Resident killer whales has been collected in Puget Sound during the summer months. Very little is known about their movements or feeding areas during the winter. In 1999, for the first time, scientists observed resident whales from Puget Sound as far south as Monterey, California.

As far as we know, the number of Southern Resident killer whales has never been large, perhaps numbering between 100 and 200 before 1960. Live captures of whales from the Southern Resident community, for the public display industry, reduced the number to fewer than 70 in 1973, when an annual killer whale census of the population began. The 2003 census counted 84 Southern Residents, including a solitary killer whale that has been living off Canada’s Vancouver Island since 2001. The 2003 number doesn’t include two calves spotted that year; they won’t be officially added to the population unless they are seen again in 2005. The peak number was reached in 1996 when 97 whales were counted. There is no comprehensive world-wide estimate of the total number of killer whales.